

Sport and Corporate Diplomacy

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Although some traditionalists continue to argue that sport should be apolitical the reality is that it has always been a tool through which power has been negotiated both within and between nations. Indeed, throughout history, sport has served as a strategic vehicle to demonstrate the ideological, political and military superiority of one nation over another. Today, sport occupies a unique position within nation-states beyond serving as a symbol of nationalism, it is also linked to: the promotion of health, community development, and as a key economic driver through tourism. With respect to the latter nations continue to invest enormous funding and resources in order to secure hosting rights of sport mega-events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup. These events not only have the potential to attract tourists but the associated global media coverage provides a platform through which to reach large segments of the world's population along with potential business investors. Today, international sport organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) occupy strategic positions as global arbiters between governments, major media corporations and corporate sponsors. Thus, it should come as no surprise that sport features prominently in contemporary international relations not only with respect to peace keeping and cultural understanding but in relation to what Jackson (2013) calls 'corporate diplomacy'. The concept of 'corporate diplomacy' recognises a major transformational shift from state diplomacy to new economically-driven forms of diplomacy operating under the guise of transnational corporations and trade agreements. So, what is 'corporate diplomacy' While there are no doubt others, three basic forms of 'sport-related' corporate diplomacy have been identified: (1) Global Sport Organisations and Sport Mega-events (2) the Sport

Industry and (3) Sport Celebrities. Each of these is briefly discussed in turn.

Sport mega-events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup provide valuable insights into nature and power of ‘corporate diplomacy’. Both bidding for, and hosting, the Olympics or World Cup are expensive. Citizens are told of the huge economic impact of the event emerging from tourism and trade opportunities, the “legacy” of new infrastructure development, and the unrivalled global media coverage which will maximise ‘nation brand’ exposure. Yet, despite all the claims the evidence of tangible benefits and how they will improve the lives of everyone are conspicuously absent. The compliance regulations and costs established by the IOC and FIFA are a challenge to all nations who host such sport mega-events. There is perhaps no better example of this than the forthcoming 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. We are already witnessing one aspect of ‘corporate diplomacy’ with respect to the relocation of poor people from their homes (favelas) in an effort to ‘clean’ spaces that not only provide an idealised image of Brazil but also FIFA and its corporate sponsors. But FIFA’s ‘corporate diplomacy’ extends much further. In order to protect the commercial interests and rights of one of its major World Cup Sponsors, American beer company Budweiser, FIFA forced Brazil to make a change in their laws that prohibited the sale of alcohol in sports stadiums since 2003. According to FIFA General Secretary, Jerome Valcke: “Alcoholic drinks are part of the FIFA World Cup, so we’re going to have them. Excuse me if I sound a bit arrogant but that’s something we won’t negotiate. The fact that we have the right to sell beer has to be part of the law” (‘Beer “must be sold” at Brazil World Cup, says Fifa’, January 19, 2012). This demonstrates the power of an international sport organisation to literally dictate the laws of nations? laws which have presumably been developed with careful consideration, over time and in the interests of citizens.

With respect to the second form of corporate diplomacy, the ‘Sport Industry’, we need look no further than Nike, Adidas, Reebok and other global sportswear manufacturers whose production factories are located in developing nations a source of cheap labour. There is a lot at stake for these transnational corporations who are constantly seeking new markets and play a central role in lobbying for the inclusion/exclusion of particular sports. New sports offer new opportunities not only for sponsorship but the sale of sports equipment and fashion. For example, the introduction of Rugby Sevens at the 2016 Rio Olympics is already raising the profile of the sport, influencing sport policy in many nations and also attracting interest by corporate sponsors. Notably, while transnational corporations such as Nike are regularly critiqued for a range of reasons, including the exploitation of child labour, they have strategically responded by developing public relations campaigns, including a wide range of ‘corporate responsibility’ initiatives. These serve to highlight the positive contributions of the company while masking a wide range of questionable industrial practices which

may be causing harm.

Finally, in relation to Sport Celebrities and Corporate Diplomacy consider former NBA star Dennis Rodman's 2013 trip to North Korea. While we can only speculate, there are at least two motivations for such an initiative. From the perspective of North Korea it was an opportunity to show North Koreans how international celebrities pay homage to Kim Jong-un, while also appealing to his fascination with basketball. From the perspective of Dennis Rodman, it was an opportunity for him to promote a new American television series Vice which is described as "a variety of mind-melting stories from around the globe and immersive detours into the scariest, most absurd, and flat-out unbelievable cultures and situations around the globe" (www.vice.com) along with his own personal business interests.

Rodman's "diplomatic mission" was not sanctioned by the USA government which has its own sport-related initiatives. For example, the US State Department has developed Sports United which advances the United States' foreign policy goals by engaging with people from around the world. However, we cannot overlook the fact that this initiative is sponsored by corporations who are no doubt seeking to forge important business links.

Corporate diplomacy signals a major change in the nature of diplomatic relations. Within the context of sport international sport organisations such as the IOC and FIFA are now strategically positioned to serve as the key intermediaries who negotiate between nation-states and transnational corporations raising serious questions about the implications of non transparent, non-democratically elected organisations holding so much power.

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